We were fortunate to be part of a two-day workshop on civil society relations in India, organised in the framework of a research on advocacy in the Dutch co-financing programme. There were fascinating presentations of research on civil society and civic space with a loose connection to the Dutch development programme of 'Dialogue and Dissent'. In the fantastic company of some of India's most outstanding civil society activists and scholars, we discussed the diverse realities of organisational life in today's India. Here are some take-aways:

**Is Civic Space Shrinking or Changing?**

This is definitely a period of the shrinking of civic space. Some argued that it is simply a part of the normal cycles of opening and closing space, while others suggest that there is something particularly worrying about the current moment. One of the participants stated that there is hardly any space left to talk about human rights or to criticise the government. But the picture remains varied. The Indian government selectively provides civic space, inviting NGOs to co-create policies, that may or may not be implemented. However, other parts of civil society are oppressed, and jail-time or violence against social activists is no exception. It takes a lot of sacrifice today to be an activist. Newspapers
worldwide observe how central identity politics have become in India and how religious minorities face increasing discrimination. What was interesting in this respect were the testimonies of participants of the workshop who explained that the harshest treatment is not for the identity movements, but for those movements that fight to protect their natural resources against national or multinational companies aiming to exploit forests, water reserves or mineral deposits.

However, civil society is also changing. NGOs adapt and find different roles, varying from facilitating or implementing government schemes to groups that retain more confrontational strategies. While participants of the workshop grieved for the loss of space for critical development discourses, they conveyed a sense of determination to make the best of the space that was still available and some were even optimistic about the transformative power they may have. One of the dualisms that was questioned in the workshop was the distinction between co-optation and autonomy. One of the participants made a strong claim that one can always seek transformative power, even if one is merely contracted to implement a welfare scheme of the government. "In every policy it is the implementation that matters, and showing a different practice is already transformational."

With the government retreating from the key areas of governance, civil society’s role becomes even more crucial at a time when their operational space is shrinking. It was also felt that despite the need to defend the constitution and to uphold dissent in public life, civil society must engage with policymakers in order to not only promote people-friendly policies but also to prevent a policy-hijack by the powerful. There was a lively debate on civil society’s legitimacy and its role as a representative or a translator between marginalized groups and policymakers.

**Importance of Case Studies and Context**

A recurring message from the activists was that the research on civil society needs to be embedded. On the one hand, the case of India is unique, with millions of NGOs, many of them with a long history of commitment to social transformation. But India can also be analysed as a case of several "somethings."
India is a case of a diverse and strong civil society. It is also a case standing for the many countries where civil society needs to operate in a shrinking space and a controlling government. It is also a country facing the pressures of neoliberalism to adopt ‘business-friendly’ policies while trying to reduce poverty and create environmentally sustainable practices. To study these broader phenomena, participants argued that it is most powerful to do case studies. In that way, ‘readers are invited to picture and even smell the local realities’, and most people learn more from a case than from a pile of aggregated, dislocated data.

**Hate is in the air**

In between the fine-grained presentations on the roles, complementarities, and everyday practices of development agencies, the conversation kept drifting back to civic space. When we say that civic space is shrinking, this usually refers to legislative measures, human rights violations, and other oppressive practices to curb the space for civil society. But what we see today in many places, including India, is a change in atmosphere. People seeking social justice find themselves increasingly operating in restricted spaces, where populist speech demonises reformers, and legitimises opinions that were until recently unsayable in public. As someone said: ‘Hate is in the air, in many ways and against many’. Hate of all kinds of ‘others’ extends to hate for people who promote inclusion. How to survive as an ‘NGO’ in a time when the Indian government excludes millions of Indians with Bengali roots from citizenship, when the US president shamelessly advertises his white American dream, and when increasing numbers of Europeans opine that those rescuing drowning Africans in the Mediterranean should be imprisoned? One coping mechanism is simply to make sure that we keep seeking out the company of the likeminded. Ending the workshop with an evening of songs, poetry and beauty was a healing experience indeed, refilling us with the courage to invent new spaces and redefine our roles in a changing world.

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